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# The Origin of Chinese New Year

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## Origin and Customs of the Chinese New Year<sup>1</sup>

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“What date is the Chinese New Year?” The Chinese ask themselves every year, but few can answer it off the top of their head. Believe it or not, they have to refer to the Chinese calendar to get the answer. The Chinese calendar is lunisolar, which means it shows elements of both the lunar and solar calendars. The Chinese use the Gregorian calendar to live their daily lives while using the Chinese lunar calendar to observe their traditional festivals and conduct their folk activities. Based on the moon’s revolution around the Earth, it is about 11 days shorter each year than the solar calendar. To synchronize with the time the Earth needs to rotate around the sun, the Chinese ancestors added a leap month to their calendar every two or three years. The Chinese New Year falls on a different day each year somewhere between the late January and February. For example, the last Chinese New Year Day fell upon February 19, 2015; the coming one, as I am writing this article, on February 8, 2016; and the next after the next will be on January 28. How do I know? Well, I checked my smart phone’s Chinese calendar.

The Chinese lunar calendar divides a year into 24 *jieqi* (solar terms) of 15 days each. The first term is referred to as Lichun Beginning of spring). The others are Yushui (Rain Water), Jingzhe (Waking of Insects), Chunfen (Spring Equinox), Qingming (Pure Brightness), Guyu (Grain Rain), Lixia (Beginning of Summer), Xiaoman (Grain Full), Mangzhong (Grain in Ear), Xiazhi (Summer Solstice ), Xiaoshu (Slight Heat), Dashu (Great Heat), Liqiu (Beginning of Autumn), Chushu (Limited Heat), Bailu (White Dew), Qiufen (Autumnal Equinox), Hanlu (Cold Dew), Shuangjiang (Frost's Descent), Lidong (Beginning of Winter), Xiaoxue (Slight Snow), Daxue (Great Snow), Dongzhi (Winter Solstice), Xiaohan (Slight Cold), and Dahan (Great Cold). The first solar term Lichun (Beginning of Spring) covers the Chinese New Year season. Since the

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<sup>1</sup> This article is written in both English and Chinese. The Chinese version follows the English one.

<sup>2</sup> Publications in English by U.S. publishers include: *Tibetan Folktales*, *This Is China: The First 5,000 Years*, *Berkshire Encyclopedia of China*, *Celebrate Chinese New Year*, *Princess Peacock: Tales from the Other Peoples of China*, and *Magic Lotus Lantern and Other Tales from the Han Chinese*.

festival is based on a lunar calendar, it is also called Lunar New Year in Chinese communities all over the world.

The Chinese have a special way of recording years, a practice that allegedly started from 2600 BCE. Unlike Westerners, who see time progress in a linear way, the Chinese see it advance in repetitive sexagenary or sixty-year cycles. Each, in turn, consists of five 12-year cycles. Each year in a sexagenary cycle is named with the combination of two Chinese characters. The first comes from a set of terms that the Chinese called Tiangan (Heavenly Stems). The names of the terms are *jia*, *yi*, *bing*, *ding*, *wu*, *ji*, *geng*, *xin*, *ren*, and *gui*. The second character comes from another set of terms named Dizhi (Earthly Branches). They are *zi*, *chou*, *yin*, *mao*, *chen*, *si*, *wu*, *wei*, *shen*, *you*, *xu*, *hai*. Therefore, the first year of a Chinese sexagenary cycle is known as Jia-zi with the first character of the Heavenly Stems combined with the first character of the Earthly Branches; the second, Yi-chou, with the second Heavenly Stems character combined with that of the Earthly Stems. This combination continues to create a total of 60 unique terms. A sexagenary cycle gets its name from the first year therein, namely, Jiazi.

Each of the 12 years in the smaller cycle is represented by an Earthly Branch term combined with the name of a specific animal. They are known as Zi-shu (Rat), Chou-niu (Ox), Yin-hu (Tiger), Mao-tu (Rabbit), Chen-long (Dragon), Si-she (Snake), Wu-ma (Horse), Wei-yang (Goat), Shen-hou (Monkey), You-ji (Rooster), Xu-gou (Dog), and Hai-zhu (Boar) in that order. Normally people tend to drop the Earthly Branch prefixes and use only the names of the animals for short. After birth, each Chinese acquires an animal sign, that is, the animal of the birth year known as *shengxiao*, which means “birth likeliness” literally.

Many of the Chinese animal names are general terms. This may create tremendous difficulty in their translation into hair-splitting English. The Chinese *yang* is a term for all animals of the ovis genus without reference to gender. The Chinese do not care whether it is a male or female sheep, goat, or argali. The same is true with *shu* (a rat or a mouse?), *tu* (a rabbit or a hare?), *ji* (a rooster, a hen, or a pheasant?), and *zhu* (a boar or a pig?).

Even the Chinese often wonder why the rat or mouse leads the pack while the boar or pig brings up the rear, why these animals but not others are listed, and why the cat is left out. No one knows the scientific answer. It is up to mythologies to satisfy our curiosity. One myth tells that the Heavenly Emperor of Jade, or Buddha in a different version, wanted to help the earthly people remember the otherwise difficult names of the years formed of the Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches. He assigned an animal to represent each of the twelve years in a smaller cycle of the bigger sextagenary cycle. With countless animals as potential candidates, he let them compete for the positions in a race. He would pick the twelve reaching him first. The lazy cat had asked the rat, his neighbor and friend, to wake him up when the race came. However, the rat not only forgot his feline friend but also tricked the ox. Before they approached the palace of the Heavenly Emperor of Jade, he found that he was trailing the ox who leading the race and that a river of considerable width and depth blocked the way. He talked the ox into carrying him on his neck. As soon as the ox set foot on the other bank, the rat jumped off and darted into the heavenly palace. The pig was the slowest of the twelve though ahead of the rest of the other animals. When the cat woke up, it was too late. Ever since, he has become the rat's natural enemy.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike the Western zodiac signs that represent the constellations' movement around the Sun, *shengxiao* or the Chinese Zodiac Animals, nevertheless, do not correspond to any of the constellations. The ancient Chinese assigned that task to the *Xiu* system translated as the Twenty-Eight Mansions. Similar to the Indian Nakshatra, it reflects the movement of the Moon through a sidereal month instead of the Sun.<sup>4</sup> The Ancient Chinese saw the sky as divided into four regions, each of which was home to seven mansions. Each of the four regions is assigned an animal name, namely, Azure Dragon, Black Tortoise, White Tiger, and Vermilion Bird. The 28 mansions also bear the names of different animals, the majority of which can be found in *shengxiao*. The other of the *Xiu* animals include ape, leopard, moose, deer, wolf, fox, raccoon, swallow, bat, pheasant,

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<sup>3</sup> Yuan, Haiwang. 2006. *The magic lotus lantern and other tales from the Han Chinese*. Westport, Conn: Libraries Unlimited, pp 170-71.

<sup>4</sup> (Wikipedia)  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twenty-Eight\\_Mansions](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twenty-Eight_Mansions).

as well as a couple of mystic creatures. Some argue that *shengxiao*, or the Chinese Zodiac Animals, have derived from the Twenty-eight Mansions system.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, to call *shengxiao* Zodiac Animals is a bit misleading. Though etymologically the term “zodiac” has something to do with animals, zodiac is universally understood as related to an imaginary belt of the heavens with an extended meaning of a circular diagram representing this belt containing pictures of animals and human figures. The Chinese *Xiu* system may relate people’s lives and places with certain constellations, but definitely not the *shengxiao* animals. The concept of treating the animals as signs of divination originated from the animals themselves upon the Earth. Traditionally, the Chinese cherish a belief system based on animalism and naturalism. That is, gods are manifested in natural objects as well as living creatures. The ancient Chinese believed that animals behaved differently because they were possessed by the souls of their ancestors with different personalities. This type of belief was based on the worship of animal spirit totems. Using compatibility astrology that combines the signs of the Western zodiac and the Chinese *shengxiao* is but a contemporary phenomenon.

All the above-mentioned are meant to provide necessary background knowledge for the Chinese New Year and its celebration. Even the Chinese themselves always wonder how and when this festival came about. Answers are nevertheless elusive. Basing their studies on archaeological findings, historians trace activities of Chinese New Year celebration to year-end rituals of offering sacrifices to gods and ancestors taking place as early as the Shang dynasty (1600-1050 BCE). The tradition of having the rituals on the first day of the Chinese calendar year was introduced in the reign of the Emperor Wu of Han (140–87 BCE). The festival was gradually formalized during the Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) eras. Meanwhile its name evolved from Gaisui (Chang of the Year) to Suichu (Ending of the Old Year). Later on, the name Yuandan (The First Day) took over and remained until the founding of the Republic in 1911 when the Gregorian calendar was introduced. The new government led by Dr. Sun Yat-sen decided to assign Yuandan to the first day of the Gregorian calendar and named the first day of the Chinese calendar year “Spring Festival.” While Spring Festival has since become the official name of Chinese New Year, the

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<sup>5</sup> "On the Relationship between the Twelve Zodiac Animals and the Twenty-Eight Mansions." On the Relationship between the Twelve Chinese Zodiac Animals and the Twenty-Eight Mansions. March 14, 2015. Accessed December 8, 2015. <http://www.pkucn.com/thread-306139-1-1.html>.

Chinese outside mainland China still prefer calling it Lunar Year. “Chinese New Year” is a popular and convenient translation for people of non-Chinese cultural backgrounds. Along with the Han Chinese in and outside China, as many as 29 of the 55 ethnic minority groups in China also celebrate Chinese New Year.<sup>6</sup> Countries like Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia celebrate it as their official festival.

Like *shengxiao*, conveniently translated as the Chinese Zodiac Animals, the origin of Chinese New Year can only be explained by folklore as well. One of the best-known mystic account tells that a Nian monster often preyed on living creatures, particularly humans, on the eve of the Chinese New Year. One year end, a god in the form of a white-bearded old man appeared from nowhere to protect humans from the attack of the monstrous beast. Before the New Year’s Eve set in, everyone else had escaped. In anticipation of the beast’s arrival, the god dressed himself in a red cloak, put up red paper on the frames of the doors and windows. Upon the arrival of the Nian monster, he set fire to a pile of bamboo sticks, which started crackling loudly. The red color and the sound scared the beast. The god then subdued it and rode away on its back. Since then, the Chinese have had the tradition of decorating their houses with red paper and firing firecrackers in memory of their savior.<sup>7</sup>

The climax of the Chinese New Year celebration lasts from three to five days. Working Chinese enjoy a week-long paid vacation including the weekend. Like Christmas, festive atmosphere starts days before the New Year’s Eve. Apart from a lot of shopping, pre-Chinese New Year activities also include house cleaning and decorating. Instead of trees, garlands, and lights, the Chinese decorate their houses with traditional paintings and paper designs of red color. Popular red paper designs include *jianzhi*, which is a form of elaborate paper cutting to be pasted mostly on window panes; *diaoqian*, literally meaning “hanging money,” which is a particular type of paper cutting to be hung from the head of a window, mostly outside the house; *fu* paper, a square piece of paper with a Chinese character that connotes good luck to be mounted on walls, door

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<sup>6</sup> Yuan, Haiwang. 2008. *Princess Peacock: tales from the other peoples of China*. Westport, Conn: Libraries Unlimited, p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> Yuan, Haiwang. 2006. *The magic lotus lantern and other tales from the Han Chinese*. Westport, Conn: Libraries Unlimited, pp 167-69.

panels, and other objects in and outside the house; and couplets, a pair of lines of versed texts of good wishes written or painted on paper scrolls to be pasted on the door frames.

Chinese children do not wake up to find presents in socks hanging from the mantel of a fireplace said to have been delivered by Santa coming through the chimneys on his reindeer-drawn sleigh. Instead they receive them from their parents' and grandparents' hands. In addition, they also receive red envelopes of cash from them as well as other senior relatives in return for a ritualized form of showing their respect. That is kowtow, an act of kneeling while touching the ground with the forehead. Kowtow must be performed three times, no more and no less. Kowtowing four times is a ritual dedicated to the dead, including the spirits of the ancestors. It is a no-no for a living person. This is only one of the many taboos with regard to the celebration of the Chinese New Year.

Days before the Chinese New Year, every household gives its house a thorough cleaning, hoping to sweep away ill fortunes and make way for coming good luck. In the same token, sweeping and cleaning on the first day of the Chinese New Year are not allowed for fear of driving away the good luck. The time period immediately before the New Year is a time to settle one's debt. Traditionally, Chinese believed that owing debts to others was a disgrace, a notion unthinkable in today's China, where plastics and mortgages are the order of the day like the Western world. Apparently market economy is sending this time-honored tradition to the museum of history.

As on Thanksgiving and Christmas, the atmosphere of family reunion dominates the Chinese New Year, particularly on the Eve. No matter where they are, so long as they have the time and money, they try all they can to get back to their homes. A few days before the New Year's Eve, public and private means of transportation are overwhelmed with millions of traveling Chinese, a large number of them being migrant workers. Even with multiplying bullet trains and private cars, transportation capacities are never sufficient for the sudden surge of passengers on a national scale within a short period of time. Every year, there are reports of people who, having missed out on their tickets, motorcycle or even walk back to their homes hundreds of miles away.

To elaborate on the eating customs with regard to the Chinese New Year, one must bear this in mind: Although more than half of its 1.37 billion people are residing in urban areas today, China had been predominantly agrarian in the past several thousand years. Due to different climatic conditions, people south of the Yangtze River known as the Southerners as opposed to the Northerners who live north of the river, have been more accessible to rain water than in the north. Historically they grew rice and raised fish while the Northerners farmed wheat and pastured animals. Consequently, the Southerners are as used to eating rice as the Northern to consuming wheat. While *niangao* (fried rice cake) has become the featured dish for the New Year's Eve in South China, *jiaozi* (boiled dumplings filled with meat or vegetable stuffing) is the stake dish of the north. Both dishes have cultural significance, though. The pronunciation "niangao" sounds like "The coming year is getting better," whereas *jiaozi* signifies the celebration of the New Year. *Jiao* means "crossing" or "passing over" and *zi*, being the first character of the twelve-character Earthly Branches, means the section of the time that covers the midnight. By eating *jiaozi*, one says goodbye to the old year and hello to the new.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from *niangao* and *jiaozi*, fish has become another featured dish on the New Year's Eve. It is also culturally significant. The Chinese pronunciation of fish "yu" is homophonic with and thereby symbolic of "affluent." Playing on words is also true with fruit. Take oranges and apples for example. Orange *ju* sounds close to *ji* or "good fortune." Apples *ping* is understood as "ping'an," which means "safe and sound." Before modern transportation made them available throughout the country, oranges were more of the Southerners' favorites while apple, the Northerners'.

The majority of the Chinese had been adhering to the traditional customs of the Chinese New Year, particularly the New Year's Eve, to the letter until the decade-long "Cultural Revolution" (1966-76), when traditions were considered anti-revolutionary. Most of them were restored in the following decades only to face the challenge of a market economy and a world of explosive emerging technologies that offer younger people more options than staying home to celebrate the New Year with their parents and grandparents in the usual traditional fashion.

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<sup>8</sup> Another folktale tells that a physician named Zhang Zhongjing invented jiaozi. One winter, an epidemic hit a large area, Zhang made jiaozi-like dumplings and boiled them in a big pot of soup mixed with medicinal herbs. The sick recovered from the medicinal soup of dumplings.



Traditionally, all family members feast together at home. An increasing number of families of younger generations, particularly in urban areas, choose to dine out nowadays. The New Year's Eve is exclusively a family night, with no outsiders invited. Parents usually hide a coin or a piece of tofu (as *fu* is homophonic with the word that signifies good fortune) in the fillings of a dumpling while making it. Whoever chances to get the dumpling is considered to have a better luck in the New Year. No family would be embarrassed if a visitor should grab the good luck. This practice may have inspired early American Chinese to improvise the fortune cookies, which are unknown in China.

After dinner, the entire family are supposed to stay up late or even the whole night with lights on. Some folklorists attribute this practice to the Nian myth: people huddled together bracing for the onslaught of the Nian monster. Eventually, staying up has become a tradition known as *showsui*, literally meaning "watch for the transition of the year." In most part of North China, the entire family are engaged in preparing vegetarian dumplings for the New Year's first breakfast. As vegetarian stuffing involves more ingredients and thereby is harder to fix, it makes time go faster. Another explanation is that meat is considered not as wholesome as vegetables. Vegetarian dumplings help the family kick off the New Year with a fresh start. While staying up, the family also enjoy the fun of playing cards and board games. Storytelling is children's favorite. Since 1983, however, a near 5-hour TV gala produced by the China Central TV has become part of the tradition of *showsui*. With more options of nightlife today, this carefully prepared gala finds it harder and harder to hold the attention of younger audience.

The striking of midnight comes as a signal to set off firecrackers and fireworks. Nearly every corner of the country, be it rural or urban, is filled with deafening sound, glaring light, and suffocating smoke. Although as large as the U.S., China has one-time zone, and it all happens at once throughout the country. This spectacle pushes the excitement of the New Year celebration to the zenith. Fire alarms and injuries are always the concern of local authorities. To ban or not to ban fireworks and firecrackers during the New Year has become their dilemma.

As soon as day breaks, every household wakes up and vies with one another in setting off their firecrackers once again to tell their neighbors that they become the first to welcome the New Year and, along with it, the first share of the good luck it will bring. Next comes the most important event of the day, or rather, the year: New Year greetings among family members living under the same roof. A very traditional family in the past would love to have four generations together, which meant longevity, prolificacy, and family unity. By the way, for a son or grandson to break from a large family was seen as a disgrace. Nuclear families are the norm today, particularly in cities. Younger members greet their parents and grandparents with the gesture of kowtowing and in return receive their parents' and grandparents' greetings in the form of red envelopes of cash, which can be significant or symbolic pending their financial capabilities. Then comes the breakfast: veggie dumplings in the North and various vegetarian foods in the South: Shanghainese eat dumplings made from glutinous rice flour filled or unfilled with nonmeat stuffing, which is usually sweet in nature. Cantonese eat dishes with vegetables of cultural significance. Take the hair weed *fa*, for example. Its homophonic name with "becoming wealthy" makes it an indispensable ingredient in the dishes.

After breakfast, a day of extending New Year greetings begin, first to neighbors, then to relatives, colleagues, friends, and even closest friends' parents. The greeting activities usually involve giving gifts to relatives and seniors. It was a time for bribery when bribery ran rampant. To save people from traveling, more and more work units hold parties so that colleagues can get together and greet one another at the same time. Today, things are changing dramatically. With ubiquitous mobile devices and social media, the radius of New Year greetings is extending even around the globe at the convenience of one's fingers.

On the first day of the New Year, a married woman must stay with her husband at his parents' home. The next day is designated for her to visit her own parents, bringing along her husband. On the second day of the New Year, the streets are filled with couples traveling to the in-laws' homes bringing along lavish presents. Women riding behind men bicycling used to be a spectacle. Today, however, private cars have mostly replaced these fading means of transportation.

Gifts and presents used to be more of monetary value. Today, they are becoming increasingly symbolic. New Year greetings and visits provide a great opportunity for reconciliation.

Old grudges are more easily forgiven with one party's proactive gesture when the air is permeated with goodwill.

A children's rhyme popular in North China best illustrates the specific customs of the first three days the Chinese New Year: "Dumplings for the first day; / Noodles for the next; / On the call of meat pies, / Everyone finds himself home." Apparently, on the third day of the New Year season, most employees have to go back to work starting from the fourth day. The third day is a time to wind down and get prepared. Only teachers and students are happily in the midst of their winter vacation.

The New Year celebration reaches another climax when the Festival of Lanterns comes on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the first Chinese calendar month, when the moon is full and bright at night. Daytime activities mostly involve folk dances: lion and dragon dances are the most popular. Other dances, peculiar to specific regions of the country, include *hanchuan* (dancing in model boats and donkeys), *gaoqiao* (dancing on stilts), and *yaogu* (dancing while beating waist drums). At night, lanterns are everywhere, on the streets and squares, in the malls and parks, and even in the hands of children. The most favored lantern for a child to show off to his or her peers in the neighborhood is the one with the golden fish design. Lanterns displayed in public vary from simple to elaborate in design and from small to gigantic in size. In the midst of lantern displays, there are all kinds activities, the favorite of which being riddle guessing with prizes. Bursts of fireworks and firecrackers announce the end of this festival and also the conclusion of the New Year season.

The entire country eats the same cultural food on the Lantern Festival: the already-mentioned dumplings made of glutinous rice filled or unfilled. There are two major kinds of this type of dumplings: *tangyuan* ("ball in soup") and *yuanxiao* ("very first night"). The former is popular in South China while the latter in the north. *Tangyuan* is made of kneaded glutinous rice dough and can be filled and unfilled. Their filling can be sweet or meaty, and their sizes as big as ping-pang ball or as small as beads. *Yuanxiao*, on the other hand is prepared by placing cubic-shaped dry fillings of sweet ingredients in a large shallow basket filled with moist glutinous rice. With repeated back-and-forth movement of the basket, the fillings are tumbled and wrapped with the flour and eventually "snowballed" bigger and bigger to a ping-pang ball size. Both *tangyuan* and *yuanxiao* can be served boiled and deep-fried.

The Chinese eat *tangyuan* and *yuanxiao* to observe the Festival of Lantern because their globular shape is analogous to the shape of the full Moon. In the eyes of the Chinese, the Moon is more than a heavenly body. Since antiquity, they have attached a great deal of emotions to it, seeing it as a media connecting people separated by geographical distances. They can share the sight of it no matter where they are, and compare its waning and waxing cycle to the vicissitude of their lives. They treat the Moon's round shape as a sign of family reunion or reconciliation. The Moon is a significant theme of Chinese literature, and incidentally the Chinese celebrate it not only on the 15<sup>th</sup> of the first month but also on the eighth month of the Chinese calendar as the Moon Festival.

This description of the Chinese New Year celebration can be limited due to its writer's personal experience against China's diversity in local and ethnic cultures. Traditions of celebrating the Chinese New Year may vary from place to place, but the spirit underlying the diverse Chinese New Year cultures is the same: a sincere wish of peace and happiness for family members and friends.